

STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL, PERCEIVED RIGHTS AND GRADE LEVEL

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Abstract

Conceptual Framework: the value and contemporaneity of the construct "Students engagement in school" (SES) has been highlighted in the theoretical literature, despite of the lack of empirical studies using validated multidimensional instruments. **Purpose:** to seek answers to the following research problem: How do students distribute by levels of school engagement and perceived rights, how do these variables relate, and how is such relation mediated by grade level? **Method:** the sample included 685 students from various regions of the country, from both sexes and divided by 6th, 7th, 9th e 10th grade. The data were collected in classroom context, through a survey which included items from the "Children's Rights Scale" (Hart et al., 1996; Veiga et al., 2001) and from the questionnaire "Students' Engagement in School: a Four Dimensional Scale (SES-FDS)", specifically comprising the cognitive, affective, behavioral and agency dimensions (Veiga, 2013), with high psychometric qualities. **Results:** Variance analyses of the engagement results (anova two-way 2x2), according to grade level (6th and 7th versus 9th and 10th) and perceived rights (low and high), allowed to find a significant main effect of the grade level in the cognitive and agency dimensions, as well as in SES total score; the effects of the perceived rights (PR) manifested in all SES dimensions, with a high level of significance, being emphasized a higher engagement in students with high rights; the significant effects of the interaction of the variables grade level and PR emerged in the cognitive and agency dimensions, as well as in SES total score. In the cognitive dimension, as in the other, the interaction was due to the decrease of the engagement from 6th/7th to 9th/10th grades, in the group of students with high rights, whereas remaining stable in the group of students with low rights. **Conclusions:** The results, confronted with the lack of research on these concepts, are considered within the perspective of social-cognitive development in adolescence, emphasizing the importance of promoting students' rights in school.

Keywords: students' engagement in school, students' rights, grade level, adolescence.

1 REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE AND EXISTENCE OF STUDENTS RIGHTS

Several authors argue that school, as a socialization agent, as well as a knowledge transmitter, should include, in its mission, the promotion of the awareness and practice of students' rights (Burden, 1993; Veiga, 2002, 2007), which have been consigned in important universal frameworks. The increasing number of students from immigrant families has impact on the characteristics of school's cultural and social environment, emerging a series of issues linked to the importance of all students' rights.

However, there is a notorious lack of studies on the evolution and perceptions of young people's rights, not only across different life contexts, but also, and specifically, in school context (Symonides, 2000; UNESCO, 1998; Veiga, 2007). A study by Hart (2001), initiated in 1993, is worth mentioning. This research included 23 countries, among which Portugal, and highlighted, not only the existence of rights, in homes and schools (Hart, Pavlovic, & Zeidner, 2001), but also their importance, as perceived by the students. The questionnaire applied was composed by 40 items, intended to reflect children's rights, as established by the United Nations Convention. The sample included students aged between 12 and 14 years old, of both sexes, and considering diverse sociocultural origins and regions (rural and urban). In most countries, the students recognized the importance of their rights as being superior to their existence; comparing school and family contexts, the sample considered the existence of rights in their homes more important, and perceived a minor existence of rights in school. Differences according to sex were found, in favor of girls, as well as considering socioeconomic status. Teachers' perspective (14 countries involved) was also measured, and showed to be similar to the students'

perception; the importance of the rights was found superior in homes, still, the perception of their existence was similar in both contexts (school and homes).

With respect to the Portuguese data, Veiga (2002) used a sample of 294 students, from 7th to 9th grades, of both sexes, and found a lower perception of their rights in subjects: from families with low instruction levels; from 9th grade, when compared with 7th and 8th grades; with an history of school failure; with an authoritarian family style and with low family cohesion; with low academic aspirations. School context was perceived as having less rights, when compared to homes, and were found no differences according to sex.

Some authors (Veiga, 2002; Veiga & Melo, 2005) have emphasized the relevance of studying students' rights. Some studies on students' perception of their rights, in schools and homes, have been carried out, using the *Children's Right Scale* (Hart, Pavlovic, & Zeidner, 1996; Veiga, 1999), an instrument which allows measuring, according to a Likert-type scale, the existence and importance of children's rights, considering the two contexts already specified, and including the following dimensions: self-determination, education, recognition-esteem, socio-emotional relationship, protection-security, and basic provision. In a study with 318 students, from 7th, 9th, and 11th grades, Veiga and Melo (2005) analyzed the differences in the perception of rights existence, attending to grade level, having found a superiority of rights in favor of younger students. No interaction between the variables grade level and nationality was found. Regarding the type of rights, the students' perceived less existence in aspects related to self-determination, protection and provision. Veiga (2001; 2007; 2009) has also focused on the promotion of students' rights within school context, specifically, through the implementation, with teachers, of an interpersonal communication-based model - The Eclectic Communication Model (ECM). In 2007, Veiga studied 1065 students, from 7th, 9th, and 11th grades, of both sexes with Portuguese and PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries) nationalities. In general, students recognized the existence of rights, regardless nationality, still, the perception of existence of rights related to self-determination, protection and provision showed lower.

In what refers to the right to instruction, differences were found in the 11th grade, whereas PALOP students perceive the existence of fewer rights. The implementation of the ECM presented a higher impact in 7th grade students, when compared to the 9th students. Veiga, García, Neto and Almeida (2009) analyzed the extension of existence of rights, in a sample of 537 students, attending the same grade levels, and with Portuguese and immigrant mothers; results were similar to those from the previous study.

2 STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL AND STUDENTS' RIGHTS

Use The relationship between School Engagement and Students' Rights remains an unexplored research field. However, the studies relating the organizational, social, and instructional climate with students engagement in school suggest the existence of direct and indirect effects, both in engagement and academic performance (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007), though the way how this influence impacts each type of engagement (cognitive, emotional, behavioral and personal agency) remains to be clarified. Zyngier (2007) studied Australian adolescents, having found that disengagement is a form of resistance against irrelevant or inappropriate practices, and, therefore, a form of struggle for their rights.

In the literature, an association between rights and intrinsic motivation, as well as between engagement and self-esteem can be found (Covell, McNeil, & Howe, 2009). Another author (Covell, 2010) suggests that the feature that differentiates right respecting schools from traditional schools is the extent of the possibility to participate in decisions. Participation is materialized in an environment where children are, intentionally, taught about the existence and nature of their rights. Covell (2010) examined students' engagement according to the type of school they attended: so-called traditional schools and schools whose principles are based on the United Nations Convention on Children' Rights. The sample included children aged from 9 to 11 years old, and the instrument used was developed by the author, and based in other authors' previous works (Furlong et al., 2003; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003): *The Young Students' Engagement in School Scale* (YESS). A higher level of engagement was found in those students attending rights-based schools, when compared to their peers attending traditional institutions, specifically, in three of the four dimensions of engagement considered: *right respecting climate*, *participation*, and *interpersonal harmony*; there were no differences in the *academic orientation* dimension. Covell (2010) also noted differences in engagement, intrinsic motivation and educational aspirations, according to sex, in favor of girls, results which are consistent with the general literature. An interaction between sex and school type was not

found. These results suggest that students are more engaged in school when they perceive the existence of their rights, both in the formal and in the hidden curriculum (Covell, 2010).

In turn, intervention toward rights promotion, carried out in school context, presents some empirical documentation, suggesting its value; particularly, the implementation of the ECM, with teachers, was associated with an improvement of students' perceptions about their rights (Veiga, 2004; 2007; Veiga et al, 2009); intervention appears more effective in younger ages (Veiga, 2007; Veiga et al, 2009). Through the implementation of an Intervention Program, with Transactional Analysis, with 8th grade students (Veiga, 2004), a rights increase was observed; students' behavioral adequacy, in school, also improved. The responsibility of promoting students' engagement concerns schools and, mostly, teachers, either in relation to themselves, as in relation to others (Veiga et al., 2009). Some authors suggest the adoption of a Human Rights perspective, within school context (Burden, 1993; Veiga, 1999; Veiga et al., 2009; Ward & Birgden, 2007). This may be accomplished, not only through the inclusion of the rights in the curriculum, but especially through the daily schooling experiences, with reference to the United Nations principles, and the construction of an intercultural school, based on equal opportunities and with respect for the differences (Veiga et al, 2009). The promotion of students' rights should be assumed as a vital condition for the students' full development (Symonides, 2000; Ward & Birgden, 2007; Veiga et al., 2009), and carried out by both school and family.

3 EMPIRICAL STUDY

In light of the above, it is observed that students' engagement in school plays a determinant role in the issues related to students' perceived rights, which indicates that SES activation strategies may have an important contribution to structure school climate. It is worth noting, however, the need for more research on the relationship between SES and perceived rights, considering the variable students' grade level, and this study may make a contribution in this field.

For this purpose, we retrieve the definition of SES proposed by Veiga et al. (2012), as the experience of a centripetal connection of the student to the school, encompassing four dimensions: affective, related to the students' sense of belonging to academic setting, friendly relationships with school members and sense of inclusion; behavioral, operationalized as student's specific conducts within classroom and toward teachers, such as disturbing and distracting behaviors; cognitive, concerning the student's capacity to process information, to seek for relations between the several concepts learned, to orient and elaborate study plans; and personal agency, which connects to a conceptualization of the student as an agent, with initiatives, interventions in classes, dialogues with teachers, questions raised and suggestions made to the teachers (Veiga, 2013). Also, the purpose of this study was to analyze how relations between students' engagement in school (SES) and perceived rights vary throughout adolescence.

In this context, and given the lack of studies, the general goal of this study was: to seek answers to the following *research problem*: How do students distribute by levels of school engagement and perceived rights, how do these variables relate, and how is such relation mediated by school grade?

4 METHOD

4.1 Sample

A convenience, non-random sample was used. The sampling criteria led to the inclusion of students attending grade levels prior to and of school transition, according to the Portuguese educational system. The sampling criteria also favoured the inclusion of students attending both rural and urban schools in northern, central and southern Portugal and in the Azores archipelago of the country. The sample included 685 Portuguese adolescents, 389 (56.8%) girls and 296 (43.2%) boys, aged 11 to 19 years old ($M = 13.82$, $SD = 1.91$). The participants were attending 6th- (20.1%), 7th- (24.8%), 9th- (28.8%) and 10th- (26.3%) grades in Portuguese schools, at the time of this study. The majority of the students (82.5%) presented no previous retentions in their school history, against 17.5% of the students to which one, two or three retentions were registered.

4.2 Measures and procedure

The students' engagement in school and the students' rights were assessed using a standard data collection protocol developed for and used in the aforementioned research project.

Students' Engagement in School. The Students' Engagement in School: A Four-Dimensional Scale (SES-4DS; Veiga, 2013) was used and included in the data collection protocol. The SES-4DS assessed the four dimensions of students' engagement in school: cognitive (e.g., "When writing my work, I begin by making a plan for drafting the text"; $\alpha = .77$); affective (e.g., "My school is a place where I make friends easily"; $\alpha = .82$); behavioural (e.g., "I am absent from school without a valid reason"; $\alpha = .71$); and agentic (e.g., "During class, I ask questions"; $\alpha = .86$). Each dimension was assessed by five items, which were answered in a six-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 "Completely disagree" to 6 "Completely agree". The items included in the behavioural dimension presented a reversed formulation and were therefore recoded for data analysis. The majority of the items are formulated in a positive way, however, the items from the behavioral dimension are expressed in a negative manner, being necessary to read the responses in reverse score (lower scores indicate higher engagement). Overall, higher scores indicate a higher engagement. The possible scores in each dimension ranged from five to 30. Higher scores in each of these dimensions were interpreted as students' higher cognitive, affective, behavioural and agentic engagement in school. The study of the scale's psychometric properties indicates a promising instrument (Veiga, 2013).

Students' Rights in School. The "Children's Rights Scale", CRS (Hart et al., 1996; Veiga et al., 2001), adapted by Veiga (2002) and composed by 6 items was also used: 1. To have influence in decisions about your life; 2. Possibility to develop all your skills and talents; 3. To receive attention and guidance from adults that care for you; 4. To have the opportunity to be with your friends; 5. To be treated fairly when you make a mistake; 6. To have time and a place to be alone, without being disturbed by others. Responses vary between 1 and 6 (strongly disagree-strongly agree). The CRS internal consistence study reported the following alpha values: 0.73 (total sample), 0.77 (6th and 7th grades), and 0.67 (9th and 10th grades).

Procedure. The data were collected in classroom context and all ethic procedures required in research were respected.

5 RESULTS

Table 1 shows the distribution of agreement (A) and disagreement (D) percentages with the Children's rights scale (CRS) items content. The item with the highest agreement (92,8%) is item 4 (To have the opportunity to be with your friends) and the item showing less agreement is item 6 (To have time and a place to be alone, without being disturbed by others).

Table 1. Distribution of agreement (A) and disagreement (D) percentages with the Children's Rights Scale (CRS) items content

CRS items	D	A
1. To have influence in decisions about your life.	31,2	68,8
2. Possibility to develop all your skills and talents.	21,0	79,0
3. To receive attention and guidance from adults that care for you.	20,0	80,0
4. To have the opportunity to be with your friends.	07,2	92,8
5. To be treated fairly when you make a mistake.	19,6	80,4
6. To have time and a place to be alone, without being disturbed by others.	43,6	56,4

A=Agree; D=Disagree.

The distribution of students' responses in the different items of the SES-4DS, in terms of the proportion of agreement and disagreement raised, was presented in previous paper (Veiga, in press). Like what happened in items of CRS, the subjects' tendency was to agree, in high level, with the statements which define each of the scale's items, in the positive expected direction.

In view of the research problem, correlations between engagement dimensions (SES) and CRS items were determined (Table 2). There were found significant correlations, in the expected direction, particularly in the cognitive dimension and total SES, as well as in Rights' items 2 ("Possibility to

develop all your skills and talents”) and 3 (“To receive attention and guidance from adults that care for you”). The lower correlations were found in item 6 To have time and a place to be alone, without being disturbed by others.

Table 2. Correlations between engagement dimensions (SES) and CRS items

SES / CRS items	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cognitive	,239**	,317**	,262**	,146**	,198**	,184**
Affective	,103**	,221**	,235**	,299**	,207**	,166**
Behavioural	,072	,187**	,207**	,182**	,223**	,022
Agency	,209**	,254**	,200**	,134**	,056	,088
Total	,252**	,381**	,345**	,285**	,245**	,184**

*p<0,05; **p<0,01

CRS Items): 1. To have influence in decisions about your life; 2. Possibility to develop all your skills and talents; 3. To receive attention and guidance from adults that care for you; 4. To have the opportunity to be with your friends; 5. To be treated fairly when you make a mistake; 6. To have time and a place to be alone, without being disturbed by others.

We sought to study the results of the subjects, distributed by two different moments of the evolutive process, considering two groups: one composed by 6th and 7th grade students, and another comprising 9th and 10th grade students. We also intended to investigate whether there were statistically significant differences, in the engagement dimensions, between students with a low and a high index of rights. Another goal was to see if a significant interaction effect, between the variables rights and grade level, occurred.

Therefore, Table 3 shows the mean and standard values of the results on engagement dimensions, obtained for groups divided by grade level and rights, dichotomized into low and high level of their existence in school. Table 4 ANOVA two-way results. A *principal effect* of school grade may be observed. The 6th and 7th grade students results are higher than those of 9th and 10th grade, in the cognitive (COG) and Agentic (AGE) dimension and in total SES score (SESTOT); there are no mean differences in the affective (AFE) and behavioural (BEH) dimensions. The rights principal effect was more extensive; results were greater in students presenting a higher rights index, in all engagement dimensions; variance analysis (ANOVAs 2x2) showed differences in engagement, between students with lower and higher levels of rights index; the last were statistically significant in all engagement dimensions (p<0.001).

The interaction effect of the variables rights and grade level occurred in the cognitive and agentic dimensions, as well as in total SES (Figures 1, 2, 3). In what refers to the cognitive dimension, the interaction was due to the decrease of engagement from 6th and 7th grades to 9th and 10th grades., in the group of students with a higher index of rights (t=6,01; GI=351; p<0.001),while it remained stable in the group with a low index of rights In the agentic dimension, a similar effect occurred: a decrease of agentic engagement in the group with a high rights index (t=2,88; GI=351; p<0.01), and the stability in the group with a low rights index (n.s.) Total SES presented the same variation: decrease (t=2,87; GI=351; p<0.01) and stability, respectively in the mentioned groups. N

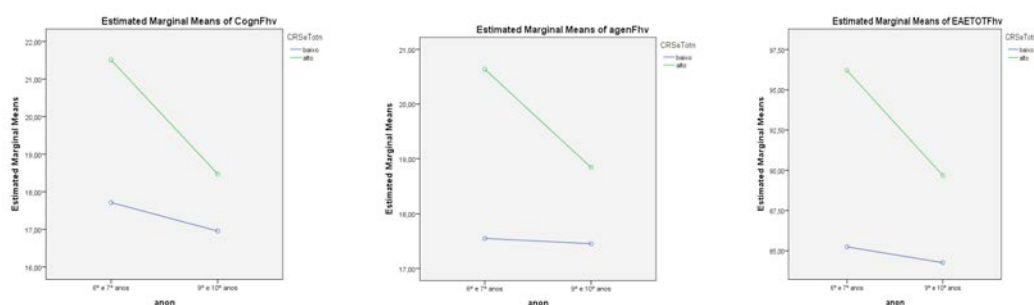
Table 3. Mean and standard deviation in engagement (SES), according to grade level and school rights (SR)

SES			Cognitive		Affective		Behavioural		Agentic		Total	
grade level	DE	N	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP
6th and 7th	baixo	129	17,7	0,4	23,6	0,4	26,4	0,3	17,6	0,5	85,2	1,0
	alto	179	21,5	0,3	26,4	0,3	27,7	0,2	20,6	0,4	96,2	0,8
9th and 10th	baixo	203	17,0	0,3	23,5	0,3	26,3	0,2	17,5	0,4	84,3	0,8
	alto	174	18,5	0,3	25,4	0,3	27,0	0,3	18,8	0,4	89,7	0,9

Table 4. Variance analysis in engagement dimensions (SES, according to grade level and school rights (SR))

	Cognitive				Affective			Behavioural			Agentic			SES-4DS Total		
	GL	QM	F	S	QM	F	S	QM	F	S	QM	F	S	QM	F	S
Grade levels	1	599,7	28,3	***	46,4	2,3	ns	24,4	2,2	ns	149,5	4,7	*	2348,8	18,2	***
SR	1	1174,6	55,4	***	897,7	43,6	***	157,4	14,3	***	833,0	26,2	***	11160,4	86,5	***
SR*grade level	1	216,4	10,2	***	33,7	1,6	ns	18,0	1,6	ns	120,4	3,8	*	1276,3	9,9	***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$



Figures 1, 2, 3. Interaction effect of the variables

6 CONCLUSIONS

The study of engagement in school oscillations, throughout adolescence, becomes important and relevance, as research has been highlighting the idea that engaged students show a better socio-scholar adjustment, both in academic and behavior (Klem & Connel, 2004; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Veiga et al., 2012), which, consequently, may carry benefits for families and society.

This transversal study used the Student Engagement in School: A Four-Dimensional Scale (SES-4DS), as well as some important items from CRS rights scale. Students' engagement in school appears, in the literature reviewed, as a pathway of academic performance and may decrease the occurrence of behavior problems and difficulties, during adolescence. Students with fewer rights in school are among those who show a lower engagement. The present study indicates higher percentages of students with school engagement and rights, and may suggest the value that students assign to what derives from there. The perception of fewer rights and the weakening of connections to school may contribute to inappropriate forms of coexistence, school failure and dropout. The greater engagement found in students perceiving the existence of more rights in school suggests the benefits of measures to promote students' rights in school, particularly of those less engaged, as a way to increase their connection to school, and decrease school failure and dropout. This could be a great way of preventing and solving students' academic problems.

Among schools social functions, we highlight teaching, educating and supporting students, particularly those with more needs. Thus, we could expect a progressive increase of the positive effects in students, throughout years of schooling. However, the results from the present study indicate a decrease in engagement (cognitive and agentic dimensions, and total SES) over adolescence. This suggests that school does not produce the expected positive effects, as students attraction for it decreases throughout the years of schooling.

The interaction between the variables rights and grade level occurred in the cognitive and agentic dimensions, and total SES. In what concerns to the cognitive dimension, the interaction was due to the decrease of engagement from 6th and 7th grades to 9th and 10th grades, in the group of students with a more perceived rights, while in the group with less rights, there was no variation. In the agentic dimension, a similar oscillation was found: a decrease of engagement in the group with more rights and stability in the group with fewer rights. The same effect occurred in total SES.

These variations in engagement may indicate that school hasn't adequately supported students with less rights, from 6th/7th to 9th/10th grades, in order to increase their low engagement in school; in what refers to students with more rights in 6th/7th grades, school has failed to stimulate their engagement and, consequently, it decreases.

In conclusion, the lack of school's positive effects in engagement suggests the introduction of support and monitoring structures, directed toward those students. The lack of previous studies creates an obstacle to comparing data, and calls attention to the need for further deeper studies. An expansion of school psychology services is also suggested.

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